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Anti-Kadafi Drumbeat Causes Shudders

Lacking Broader Strategy, We Could Have Our Bluff Called

By ROBERT E. HUNTER

Throughout the week, the Reagan Administration has renewed its verbal pressure on Libya's terror-sponsoring strongman, Col. Moammar Kadafi. The tactic is variously described as a shot across the bow, a deterrent to expected terrorist acts or a means to get him to do something "irrational." Presumably the last-named would justify a U.S. response like the air raid on Libya last April 15.

That attack was supposed to teach Kadafi that crime does not pay. Strikingly, there has been no terrorism against Americans since then. This week Administration spokesmen have been telling contradictory tales about Kadafi's current intentions, but so far no "smoking gun" has been introduced in evidence. We can't know, therefore, whether the Libyan leader learned the lesson intended by the U.S. air raid.

The West European allies were also supposed to be taught that condoning the bully on the block will eventually hurt everyone. Indeed, since April there has been a bit more European cooperation. And Gen. Vernon Walters, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, is being dispatched to allied nations to stimulate more support in the struggle against Libya.

Walters' trip highlights another lesson of the U.S. air raid that should have been learned but apparently wasn't. It demonstrated clearly that unilateral U.S. military action can set off a firestorm in the Western alliance. The only ally that openly provided help was Great Britain, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is still suffering the political aftershocks. The next time, if there is one, the United States should plan on using military resources unencumbered by allied decision—the U.S. 6th Fleet or bombers flying round trip from the United States.

Walters' visit and the Administration's new rhetorical offensive against Kadafi were thus backwards. The ambassador will arrive in Western Europe amid rekindled fears of U.S. military action against Libya that could provoke retaliation on European soil. Allied leaders recall that Walters' last mission, just before the April air raid, was ostensibly for consultations. It later transpired that critical decisions had already been taken. The United States thereby gained tactical surprise against Libya, but left many Europeans thinking that they'd been had.

The anti-Kadafi drumbeat will also affect Egypt. U.S. military relations with that country are vital if we are to be able, in a crisis, to move forces to the Persian Gulf. Survival of the government of President Hosni Mubarak is critical to hopes for Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Yet Egypt has been made vulnerable by U.S.-Egyptian joint naval exercises, even if their being held now is only a coincidence. Little love is lost on Kadafi in most of the Arab Middle East. But the Mubarak government is perforce seen as complicit in U.S. strategy against an Arab state, to no gain for Cairo and potential loss in terms of anti-American and anti-Mubarak feelings.

The Reagan Administration does face a serious problem. Because of its marriage with television, terrorism rivets American attention. This potential is shown in statistics on American travel to Europe. In part because the President has failed to put the problem into perspective—only five Americans have been killed this year—the potential for panic lies just beneath the surface.

The initiative thus continues to reside with Kadafi and other terror-sponsors, such as Syria, that have historically been more active. And the Administration risks having its bluff called by the next terrorist act: Will it use military force or leave pledges unredeemed?

Some Administration strategists apparently believe that there is value in always having a villain to distract attention, whether it be the Soviet "evil empire" until that went out of style, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas, or Kadafi. But the last named can and does strike at Americans. Countering his role demands broader U.S. efforts that can eventually deny him the political initiative.

In the meantime there could be occasions when military force is needed, either to blunt a terrorist action or to exact a penalty. But the dilemmas must be faced foursquare. It is rarely easy to collect and present evidence. Military action often kills civilians and thus undercuts its own purpose. The American people in general are reluctant to condone preemptive attack. And U.S. diplomacy, especially in Europe, can be damaged if action appears either rash or disproportionate. In short, any saber-rattling must be part of a clear, conscious, coordinated strategy for dealing with Kadafi and his ilk.

The slipshod way in which the anti-Kadafi campaign has been conducted this week raises doubts that such a strategy exists or that its execution is under effective control. Nor is there evidence of commitment to a longer-range policy to take the political initiative away from the terrorists. No effort is being made to keep the threat in perspective. Cooperation with allies, essential for lasting success, is obviously not top priority. And the Reagan Administration still refuses to play the key U.S. role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. That role is essential to help eradicate a primary cause of Middle East terrorism and to ensure that the United States is taken seriously in the region.

The Administration's current offensive against Kadafi may be based on hard intelligence about impending terrorist acts. If so, the difficulties in orchestrating its actions are even more baffling. The anti-terrorism campaign must be seen as more than an effort, episodically, to deal with domestic fears. Only a comprehensive strategy applied coherently can build credibility abroad when force is called for.

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